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SUBJECT: SPANISH OFFICIALS REACT TO PRESIDENT BUSH REMARKS
ON IRAQ WITHDRAWAL

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires J. Robert Manzanares,
reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

1. (C) Spanish officials have reacted defensively to President Bush's remarks concerning Spain's withdrawal from Iraq, made at his September 23 joint press conference with Iraqi Interim Prime Minister Allawi. During a courtesy call by Charge and Econcouns September 24, the MFA's Director General for Europe and North America, Jose Maria Pons, said the Spanish government was "surprised" by President Bush's remarks, and the Spanish government is doing a "quick analysis" of the comments. He added that Zapatero never mentioned the United States by name in his comments in Tunis. (Note: On September 9 in Tunis, Zapatero said the situation in Iraq would improve if other countries were to withdraw their troops as Spain did. End note.) Pons reminded Charge and Econcouns that every Friday the Council of Ministers meets and First Vice President de la Vega gives a press conference afterward. He expected de la Vega to comment on President Bush's remarks.

2. (SBU) At the press conference following the Council of Ministers meeting, de la Vega was rather controlled, saying "Our decision to withdraw the troops was made with the overwhelming support of the Spanish people, and was announced months before the attacks in Madrid. We have three decades of experience fighting ETA, Grapa and al Qaeda. We will continue to do so firmly and consistent with national and international law." She concluded by saying the Spanish government would not formally protest the president's remarks.

3. (SBU) But the Socialist Party's spokesperson on Congress's foreign affairs committee, Rafael Estrella (normally a strong supporter of close U.S.-Spain relations), reacted in a less measured fashion, telling the press "what Bush said is untrue, because the withdrawal of Spanish troops (from Iraq) was a commitment of the Socialist Party in the event the UN did not assume responsibility for the situation in Iraq. Since this did not happen, it was decided to withdraw the troops." According to Estrella, it wasn't the withdrawal of Spanish troops that "emboldened the terrorists" in Iraq because "before the war and the invasion there was no terrorism there." It has been the "illegal war and the way in which political change has occurred that has plunged the country into chaos and is fueling terrorism." Bush should "correct" his policies in Iraq rather than "transfer responsibility to those who have fulfilled their campaign promises consistent with international law."

4. (U) President Zapatero thus far has not reacted to President Bush's comments.

5. (C) Comment: The Zapatero government and the Socialist Party remain intensely sensitive to the charge that the Socialists won the March 14 election as a result of the March 11 terrorist attacks in Madrid. In that sense it is little surprise Spanish officials -- even the normally pro-U.S. Estrella -- have reacted defensively to the president's comments.
MANZANARES